

AN OVER-ALL VIEW OF THE PROBLEM OF TIME  
IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

The problem of time is one amongst those outstanding problems, which appear again and again throughout the different phases of history of ideas, across the boundaries of cultures.

The universality of the temporal dimension of human experience is pointedly expressed in the well-known saying:

*Na so'sti pratyayo loke yatra kālo na bhāsate* i.e. there is no cognition in the world where time is not manifest. However, the enigmatic character of the time-experience has been a formidable challenge to the human intellect. The famous exclamation of St. Augustine — in Book XI Ch. XIV of « The Confessions »<sup>1</sup> — has become known far beyond the range of theological circles:

« What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not ».

The attempts at understanding this fundamental problem have given rise to an overwhelming variety of views. A wide range of disciplines, which fall within the domain of humanistic as well as natural sciences, involving different methods and approaches, have taken up the investigation of this problem. So much so, that the problem of time can be said to be one amongst the most pertinent issues fruitful for a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study<sup>2</sup>.

The intercultural perspective of the study of time shows in particular the central role, that this problem has played in the various philosophical and theological traditions. The impact of these ideas has been far-reaching, as a philosophy of time remains an indispensable factor in any interpretation of man and his existence. In the context of an

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1. AUGUSTINE, *The Confessions*, transl. by E. B. Pusey, New York, 1957.

2. Cf. J. T. Fraser, F. C. Haber, G. H. Müller, eds., *The Study of Time*, I-IV, Berlin-Heidelberg, 1972-81.

investigation of the problem of time it is indeed rewarding in many ways to study the contributions from the philosophico-religious traditions of India. The different conceptions of time, that have emerged in the philosophies of India, are of interest also for an appraisal of Indian religions as well as for an understanding of Indian culture in general.

In this connection I would like to observe, that there seem to be some misunderstandings about the philosophical treatment of the problem of time in the context of Indian thought. Ignoring the different conceptual models of time, that the history of Indian philosophy bears witness to, it is generally held that Indian thought operates with the idea of cyclic time. We will take up this question for a brief discussion in the last section of this article. We shall note the sources and implications of this designation and the misrepresentations of it, which in turn have given rise to erroneous interpretations of some of the Indian myths and symbols.

But first we make a brief survey of the rich and varied speculations about the problem that are disclosed through a study of the original sources<sup>3</sup>.

Going through the forest of the early sources of Indian traditions, one comes across a host of ideas touching upon the different aspects of the problem of time, scattered in the form of myths and allegories. Some of these ideas are highly suggestive and can even be regarded as anticipating later theories, but are themselves by no means full-fledged views. References can be made to the Atharva Veda, the Upaniṣads, the epic Mahābhārata and also the Purāṇas. We shall refer to the Purāṇas later on and for the present focus exclusively on the well-formulated views that have emerged in the history of Indian philosophy.

A careful examination of the philosophies of India discloses a spectrum of views about time. The philosophical contrasts of ideas involved in the different theories are indeed fascinating. On the one hand, there is the view which emphasizes the reality of time mentioning its ontological properties e.g. all-pervasiveness, etc.; on the other hand there is the view which dialectically rejects the ontological reality of time, pointing to its phenomenal character. Again, we find the view of time as indivisible, ubiquitous and unitary, as opposed to the theory which vehemently holds time to be essentially discrete, all ideas of time-continuum being merely a conceptual construction. Moreover, the differences even amongst the various theories of time as discrete disclose a variety of philosophical patterns.

These philosophical positions regarding time are identified in the different metaphysical structures, which all have their distinct under-

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3. A. N. BALSLEV, *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1983. We refer to this work for a detailed investigation of the present subject.

standing of creation, supported by their respective theories of causality. It is evident that a study of such a fundamental problem cannot be isolated and disconnected from other major philosophical issues of a specific system in a given tradition. It is interrelated and interwoven with such basic concepts as those of being and becoming, change and causality, creation and annihilation etc.

Let us consider first the Brahmanical tradition. The most important idea that pervades the entire tradition, rooted in the Upaniṣads, is that of the identical immutable reality underlying all change and becoming. The six well-known Brahmanical schools, which arose in the course of history, developed their distinct metaphysical structures — pluralistic, dualistic, monistic and eventually non-dualistic — without ever departing from the central intuition which forms the core of the Ātma doctrine of the Upaniṣads. However, a careful examination of these different structures reveals the variation in their philosophical treatment of the problem of time. The different views are harmonised in each system with its total vision of reality.

Now we can attempt to catalogue the various conceptual models of time, that are set up by the different Brahmanical schools.

A study of the problem of time in Indian philosophy is of special interest in connection with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika schools. It is here that one comes across a bold realistic view of time. These schools, advocating a pluralistic metaphysics supported by *ārambhavāda* as their doctrine of creation and *asatkāryavāda* as their theory of causality, focus on the reality of absolute time (*mahākāla*) as vital to their entire conceptual framework. The philosophers of these schools raised and squarely faced a wide variety of questions regarding different aspects of the problem of time. Their philosophical literature contains discussions about such questions as, what could be the ontological properties of time — granted it is a real per se —, how is time known, how does it stand in relation to such basic problems as causality, motion and space. For the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophers time is all-pervasive (*vibhu*). It is an eternal category of existence (*nitya padārtha*); that is to say, it is without beginning (*anādi*) and without end (*ananta*), it is uncomposite (*nīramśa*), does not presuppose any substratum (*anāśrita*), it is an independent real (*svatantra*) and unchanging (*niṣkriya*).

It is interesting to observe, that while for Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika to deny time an objective reality is to confront a static universe, where there is no room for any change or movement, for the dualistic Sāṅkhya-Yoga the reality of change does not necessarily call for the postulation of a unitary time. Time, as a category of existence, does not figure in their list of *tattva*. A penetrating analysis of all the implications of the Sāṅkhya conceptions of *sadrśa* and *visadrśa pariṇāma* is necessary in order to grasp the understanding of the problem of time in this system.

Based on *abhivyaaktivāda* as doctrine of creation and *asatkāryavāda* as theory of causality, these schools weave a different philosophical

pattern. It is causality which is the key problem for understanding change and becoming in Sāṅkhya. To the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophers, however, even the very problem of causality points to the necessary presupposition of the existence of absolute time as a feature of reality.

In this connection it is to be observed, that whereas the involvement with the problem of time is implicit and indirect in Sāṅkhya, the philosophical works of the Yoga school contain profound and pertinent discussions concerning the problem. This school developed a view of discrete time, maintaining the objective reality of the moment as the basis for the idea of sequence (*kṣaṇastu vastupatitaḥ kramāvalambī*). The theory emphasizes, that the idea of an unitary objective time either as a collection of moments or as an objective series is a subjective representation, devoid of reality (*sa khalvayaṃ kālo vastuśuṇyo buddhi-nirmāṇaḥ śabdajñānānupātī*). No two moments exist simultaneously (*Na ca dvau kṣaṇau saha bhavataḥ*)<sup>4</sup>. Allowing these illuminating quotations to speak for themselves, we pass on to the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta.

In the non-dualistic structure of Advaita Vedānta, supported by vivartavāda, is to be found the most stringent formulation of the Upaniṣadic conception of reality as « the-one-without-a-second » (*ekamevādvi-tīyam*). The school, as the very name suggests, rejects all duality and thereby reduces the problem of change quā time to a problem of appearance. The philosophy rejects the Sāṅkhya idea of reality of change by substituting *vivartavāda* in the place of *pariṇāmavāda*. It refutes as well the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika conception of the reality of time<sup>5</sup>. The philosophy focuses on the conception of being as non-dual, immutable and impartite. This is attained by the negative method (*neti neti*), by denying all three forms of differences (*bheda-traya-svagata*, *svajātīya*, *vi-jātīya*) of it. It deserves special mention that it is in the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, that Brahmanism finds its finest expression of the conception of being as timeless.

Now we turn to the entirely novel set of ideas introduced by the Buddhist thinkers. The Buddhist stand regarding the problems of being and time represents a complete departure from the views hitherto discussed with reference to the Brahmanical tradition.

Conceptions of being as permanent, as immutable, as substance or as universal could find no place in Buddhist thought. They also rejected all ideas about time as unitary, as an all-embracing receptacle or as an ontological category. The idea of reality as flux, involving conceptions of time as instant and of being as instantaneous, came to play a decisive role. The profound influence of the doctrine of momentariness —

4. All the three quotations are from the commentary by Vyāsa on Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali, Benares, 1972.

5. As for example in *Citsukha's Tattvapradīpikā* (Benares, 1974), and *Srī Harṣa's Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhāḍya* (Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1970).

*kṣaṇikavāda* — in the different periods of the development of Buddhist thought is well-known. The doctrine, however, has been variously interpreted by the Buddhist philosophers belonging to the three periods of the history of Indian Buddhism.

The classical Buddhist arguments formulated by the philosophers of the Sautrāntika school, belonging to the first phase of Buddhism, were to remain famous. It is with the help of the notion of causal efficiency i.e. *arthakriyākāritva* — the criterion that distinguishes the real from the fictitious — the Buddhist philosophers very skilfully demonstrated, why the real has to be necessarily momentary in character. They focused on the idea of the ontological fusion of being as instantaneous and time as instant, attributing their so-called separation to an arbitrary linguistic convention. The understanding of the philosophy of time in Buddhism would involve the analysis of the radical implications of this doctrine, noting carefully the internal differences in the interpretation as Buddhist thought evolved in course of History. There are, for example, important differences between the Vaibhāṣika and the Sautrāntika schools, belonging to the first phase of Buddhism. The Vaibhāṣika formulation of the doctrine of momentariness was seriously criticized by Śāntarakṣita in his *Tattvasaṃgraha* as being totally unbuddhistic. Similarly, the Mādhyamika analysis and the Vijñānavāda understanding of the doctrine have their own striking characteristics. The variations are interesting and illuminating for an appraisal of Buddhist philosophy of time.

Apart from the different views of time so far encountered it remains for us to mention the Jaina position regarding this problem. The Jainas, taking their stand on the reality of time, advocate an atomic conception. To the Jainas, the time-atoms (*kālāṇu*) are not only real and objective, but are also held to be without beginning and end. They are distinguished from the space-atoms by the fact, that unlike the latter they are not capable of combining. The conventional time-periods are relative concepts, dependent on extraneous factors such as any standard motion.

It is needless to say, that in order to make a study of the problem of time in Indian thought, one has to explore each distinct view in the context of the specific metaphysical structure from which it stems, observing its relation with the other major concepts, which characterize the particular system. Moreover one has to take full note of the polemics and exchanges of the different schools stemming from the Brahmanical, the Buddhist and the Jaina traditions. It is the conflicts of ideas, which fully disclose the philosophical implications and consequences of their respective positions.

Thus we have to note the challenge, that the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness presented to Brahmanical thought. This doctrine is incompatible with the idea of the permanent, persisting self/substance. The Brahmanical philosophers, in turn, being fully aware of the deva-

stating consequences of this doctrine, attacked the idea vehemently. The philosophical literature contains abundant records of these exchanges.

We also have to take into account the battle of ideas within the framework of each tradition. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika conception of absolute time, for example, has been challenged by the Sāṅkhya-Yoga schools as well as by Advaita Vedānta. The philosophical significance of these disputes must not be underestimated.

In this short compass it has been possible to take only a bird's eye view of the Indian philosophical scene. A closer analysis of this spectrum of views clearly brings out the major importance of the problem of time in Indian philosophy.

Now we turn to the proposed discussion concerning the widespread idea of cyclic time in Indian thought.

The study of time in its intercultural perspective is a fascinating and a difficult task. The existing literature on the subject is simply enormous. Yet as one takes a global view, one cannot avoid noting some general designations ascribed to particular traditions as characterizations of their views of time. Thus, for example, in a confrontation of the Indian, the Greek and the Judeo-Christian traditions regarding the problem of time, it is generally held that the Greco-Indian traditions cherish a cyclic view of time, whereas the Judeo-Christian traditions advocate a linear view.

An attempt to clarify, what these designations actually imply, immediately discloses the difficulties. The terms « linear » and « cyclic » are obviously depicting notions drawn on the analogy of geometrical figures. The intended meaning of these symbolical representations is to convey a complex set of ideas about time. Considering the extensive use of these symbolic descriptions, it is indeed surprising, that a proper philosophical formulation as to their contents and implications should be so scarce. What we get to know, however, is that the linear notion of time, derived from the Biblical sources, indicates that time has a beginning and an end. It emphasises the uniqueness, the unrepeatability of the individual life and event, making history meaningful, freeing it from mechanical recurrences. The cyclic view, on the other hand, is interpreted as providing a conceptual framework, where nothing really new ever happens, and thus making no room for progress. As implied by the image of a circle, the future event is also a past event since the beginning and end coincide in a cycle.

Now that we have noted the general features, let us refer to a concrete case, where the clash of these ideas is fully demonstrated.

The debate between the so-called cyclic and linear time is an old one. Saint Augustine in his confrontation with Greek thought can be found polemizing precisely against the idea of circular time at an early date of the Christian era. It is important to note very carefully the charges, that he brings against the idea, as these provide us at once

with valuable clues regarding the implications, that are read into this appellation. This would then enable us to see, to what extent such a designation can be applied to Indian thought and where the limits and the pitfalls lie.

In his «City of God»<sup>6</sup> Saint Augustine records the idea of circular time stemming from the Greek tradition as well as raises objections against the idea. He writes in Book XII Ch. XIV:

«As those others think, the same measures of time and the same events in time are repeated in circular fashion; on the basis of this cyclic theory, it is argued, for example, that, just as in a certain age the philosopher Plato taught his students in the city of Athens and in the school called the Academy, so during countless past ages, at very prolonged yet definite intervals, the same Plato, the same city, and the same school with the same students, had existed again and again. Heaven forbid, I repeat, that we should believe that. For Christ died once for our sins, but "rising from the dead he dies no more, and death shall no longer have domain over him"».

An analysis of this significant passage brings out the important features of the specific conceptual model that Saint Augustine has in front of him. It points to the ideas about strict periodicity of cosmological processes involving an exact repetition of all events including the destinies of individuals.

What is theologically of utmost consequence is to observe the complete absence of soteriology, no possibility of salvation. As Saint Augustine puts it in Book XII Ch. XIII,

«From this whirligig they are quite unable to free their immortal soul even though it has attained wisdom, for in its own uninterrupted circular course it moves back and forth between false happiness and genuine unhappiness».

The ideas of world-cycles involving recurrent cosmological processes are scattered in the history of Greek philosophy. Anaximanes, Heraclitus, Empedocles as well as the Stoics all indicate the belief, that the cosmos is eternal, but periodically renews itself. The Greek concept of the «Great Year» (Eniautos) operates with the idea of a timeperiod in which the cosmos completes one cycle. This is followed by a new cycle and so on infinitely. The idea of exact repetition with exact recurrence of events has been referred to the Pythagoreans<sup>7</sup>, a view which accounts for «a sense of fate» that dominated Greek thinking in the pre-Christian era. The idea of transmigration is also familiar in Greek thinking.

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6. AUGUSTINE, *De Civitate Dei*, transl. by P. Levine, Heinemann, London, Harvard Univ. Press, 1966.

7. Cf. ERICH FRANK, *Philosophical Understanding and Religious Truth*, Oxford, 1945.



Now let us turn to the Indian scene and examine the source of the designation of « cyclic time » in the Indian context. The idea of world-cycles is elaborately worked out in the Purāṇas. The epic Mahābhārata and the Bhagavad-Gītā also use the idea. We can even say, that the idea is generally accepted by the Indian culture as a whole<sup>8</sup>. The Purāṇas operate with a grandiose conception of the cosmological process in terms of repeated creation and dissolution. The Vāyu Purāṇa, for example, conceives a world-cycle as a day of Brahmā, followed by his night i.e. cosmic dissolution (pralaya). The time-span of a world-cycle is divided and subdivided according to different scales as equivalent to so many manvantaras, mahāyugas, yugas etc. The period of the world-cycle is conceived in terms of millions of human years.

If it is interesting to observe the similarities of the idea regarding world-cycles in the Greco-Indian field of speculations, it is even more important to note the differences in the use and the implications of this idea in the Indian context. First of all, let us note that the world-cycles can be compared to one another in terms of generic similarity, just as one day resembles another. But the idea of exact repetition involving the return of the particular like in the Greek conceptual model, which Saint Augustine is confronting, is nowhere to be found in the conceptual framework of Indian thought. The idea of transmigration in the Indian context is understood as a necessary sequel of the doctrine of Karma. The mechanical recurrence of human destiny is not a feature of Indian thought. Karma is not interpreted as « an external destiny driving man to his doom, nor a blind mechanical framework from which there is no escape »<sup>9</sup>.

The Greek model has influenced many interpretations of the so-called cyclic philosophy, which is, according to Arnold Toynbee, « a counsel of despair for humanity ». He writes in his famous work *A Study of History*: « This philosophy of sheer recurrences, which intrigued, without ever quite captivating the Hellenic genius, came to dominate contemporary Indic minds ». He points to the « cyclic theory of time » which the « Hindu thinkers had evolved », and refers to the Purāṇic idea of *Kalpa* etc. Toynbee further comments:

« Are these "vain repetitions" of the Gentiles really the law of the Universe, and, therefore, incidentally the law of the histories of civilizations. If we find that the answer is in the affirmative, we can hardly escape the conclusion that we are the perpetual victims of an everlasting cosmic practical joke, which condemns us to endure our sufferings and to overcome our difficulties and to purify ourselves of our sins — only to know in advance that the automatic and inevitable lapse of a certain meaningless measure of time cannot fail to stultify all

8. An exception is the school of Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā.

9. T. M. P. MAHADEVAN, *The religio-philosophic culture of India*, in « The Cultural Heritage of India », vol. I, Calcutta, 1937, repr. 1969.



our human exertions by reproducing the same situation again and again *ad infinitum*, just as if we had never exerted ourselves at all »<sup>10</sup>.

It is now clear, how the widespread use of this designation of « cyclic time » often misrepresents Indian thinking. The importance of the soteriological aim which operates as the motive force behind the « myth of cosmological cycles » must not be lost sight of.

Mircea Eliade captures the significance. In his *Le temps et l'éternité dans la pensée Indienne*<sup>11</sup> he writes:

« Il nous importe de mettre en lumière le fait suivant: a savoir, qu'en agrandissant toujours plus audacieusement la durée et le nombre des cycles cosmiques, l'Indien avait en vue un but sotériologique. Epouvanté par le nombre sans fin de naissances et de renaissances des Univers, qui s'accompagnait d'un nombre aussi considérable de naissances et de renaissances humaines régies par la loi du *Karma*, l'Indien était en quelque sorte obligé de chercher une issue à cette roue cosmique et à ces transmigrations infinies ».

It is evident, that in order to do justice to this complex set of ideas one has to perceive them as forming an inter-connected conceptual system, in all the versions in which they have appeared in the wide canvas of Indian thought. The basic intention of bringing up this question is to point out the reasons for being careful as to the use of the so-called appellation of « cyclic or circular time », if the term is not to be a misnomer.

In the previous section of this article we have taken an over-all view of the distinct conceptual models that the philosophical treatment of the problem of time has given rise to in Indian thought. It is significant, that this variety of conceptual models is to be understood against the background of the pan-Indian premise of the beginningless (*anādi*) cycle of existence (*samsāra*). In this connection I would like to draw attention to the importance of a correct understanding of the image of the wheel (*cakra*) in Indian thought.

The commentary by Vyāsa on the *Yoga-Sūtra* 4/11 gives us an authentic example of how it is used in the Brahmanical philosophical literature. The context is, how from virtue arises happiness, from impiety pain, from happiness attachment, from pain aversion; attachment and aversion both lead to efforts, resulting in actions, which in turn again give rise to virtue or impiety, happiness or pain, attachment or aversion.

10. A. TOYNBEE, *A Study of History*, revised and abridged by the author and Jane Caplan, Oxford University Press, New York, 1972, pp. 157-58. He writes further on p. 487: « The application of the "theory of eternal recurrence" to human affairs is a counsel of despair for humanity, since this doctrine denies, that Man has any power ever to effect a permanent change in his condition, and teaches him that he is condemned to suffer the meaningless revolutions of the wheel of existence ».

11. MIRCEA ELIADE, *Le temps et l'éternité dans la pensée Indienne*, Eranos Jahrbuch, 1951, Band XX, Zürich, 1952, pp. 219-52.

Thus, it is said, revolves « the six-spoked wheel of the round of rebirths (saḍaram saṃsāracakram) ».

In the Buddhist tradition one also finds the wheel of becoming i.e. « bhava-cakra ». This is the pictorial image representing the twelve links (nidānas) of the causal formula pointing to the « different stages in the transmigration of the individual »<sup>12</sup>. The twelve nidānas are avidyā, saṃskārāḥ, vijñāna, nāmarūpa, ṣaḍāyantanāni, sparśa, vedanā, tṛṣṇā, upādāna, bhava, jāti and jarāmaraṇa, i.e. ignorance, aggregates, consciousness, name and form, six sense-organs, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, old age and death.

From the above the meaning of the symbolic representation of the wheel in the various philosophico-religious traditions of India is clear. The significance of the symbols and myths in a culture can be grasped only within the conceptual framework, where they are meaningfully used.

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12. Cf. E. J. THOMAS, *History of Buddhist Thought*, London, 1933.

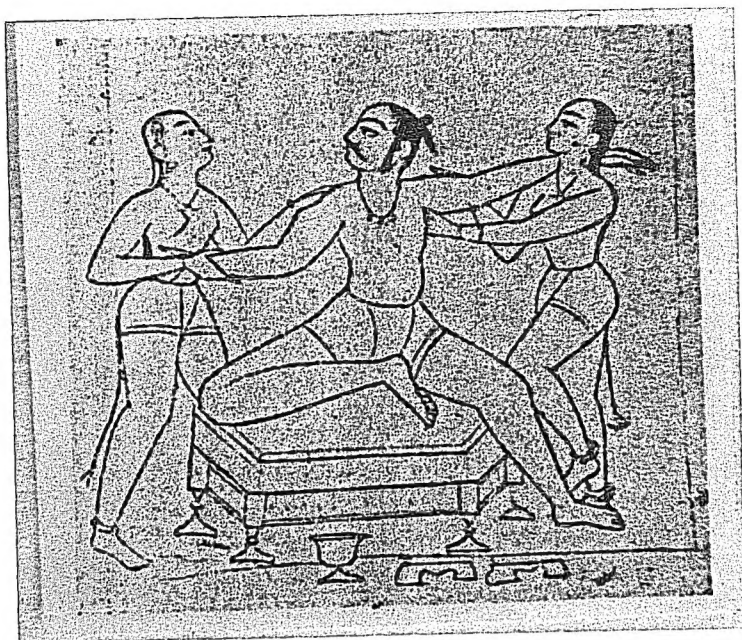


Fig. 1

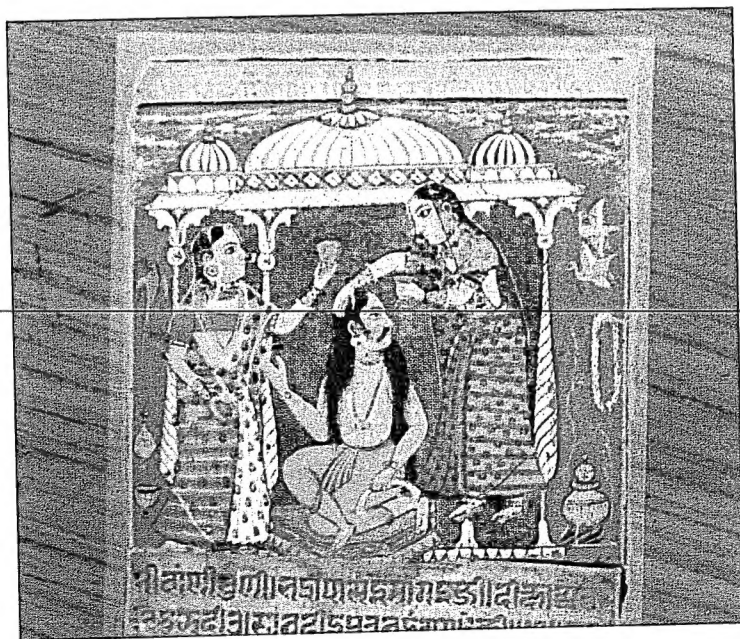


Fig. 2

चनमनकिसकाउरनाया बहिनीरहितमकेति  
 रोजीतौआयविमसीकोय गाना काचीकोनीछो



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

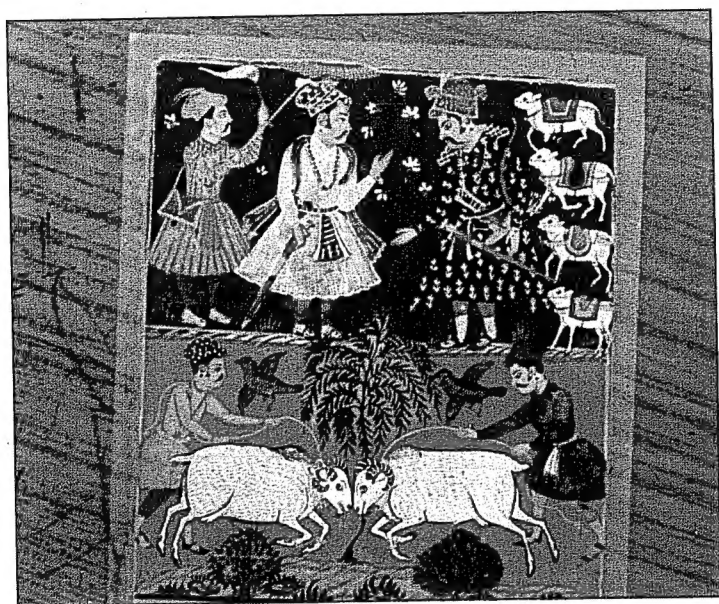


Fig. 6